

# Punctuation And Capitalisation Errors Of Turkish Efl Students In Composition Classes: An Evidence Of L1 Interference

**Gencer ELKILIÇ**

Faculty of Science and Letters,  
Department of English Language and Literature,  
Kafkas University,  
Kars/Turkey

[Gencerelkiliç1322@gmail.com](mailto:Gencerelkiliç1322@gmail.com)

**Turgay HAN ,**

Faculty of Science and Letters,  
Department of English Language and Literature,  
Kafkas University,  
Kars/Turkey

[turgayhan@yahoo.com.tr](mailto:turgayhan@yahoo.com.tr)

**Selami AYDIN**

NecatiBey Education Faculty  
Department of English Language Teaching,  
Balıkesir University  
Balıkesir/Turkey

[selami.aydin@hotmail.com](mailto:selami.aydin@hotmail.com)

**Abstract:** While writing composition, Turkish EFL students sometimes confront punctuation and capitalization problems due to their L1 habits. Although such problems can be ignored if the learner is not trained for teaching the target language in future, it is not the case, most of the time, for a teacher candidate or a person expected to work or use it for his or her carrier; in this sense proficiency in Target language(here English) is inevitable. In the present study, punctuation and capitalization errors of the students, studying at Kafkas University, in the Department of English Language and Literature, were determined and the errors stemming from L1 interference were recorded through exam papers as well as through inclass or out of class composition papers. A total of 300 papers written by 32, intermediate level students, (12 males, 20 females); attending the classes regularly, 225 papers written by 29 upper-intermediate level students (8 males and 21 females) were examined in this study. According to the result of the study both intermediate and upper-intermediate students committed fewer interference errors (20, 3 % and 17 %, respectively) than general errors and as the level increases, the rate of the interference decreases (20, 3 % for intermediate level students, whereas 17 % for upper-intermediate students).

**Keywords:** punctuation errors, capitalization errors, Turkish EFL students, L1 interference, composition classes, Kafkas University.

## Introduction

In academic life writing skill has a special importance as it is an active skill in evaluation the actual language competence of language learners. Yet, the students who study at English Language Departments are not enough trained in composing activities during their high school education since they are accepted to the universities by taking a general test (YDS ) in which there are grammar, translation, reading comprehension and some organization questions in paragraph, but there are no such active skills as writing and speaking skills test questions. On ground that, especially freshman students struggle for composing for some time till they get enough instruction on the issue how to compose. However, the writing skill courses do not always cover punctuation and capitalization topics in detail even they raise students' awareness in linguistic skills as grammar and other organizational problems in composition. When it comes to mechanical issues in composing, there are lots of problems evident in exam papers of freshman students may be stemming from neglecting them but emphasizing other areas of linguistic categories. In this context, students fall in short conveying their ideas in writings clearly, so, here, drawing their attentions to the punctuation and capitalization may be effective in getting rid of ambiguity in their written works.

To express thoughts and ideas more clearly, to specify the structure of a sentence and also the pauses in a sentence; moreover to ease reading comprehension and to state the ways of intonation and stress on a sentence punctuation is crucial (Akalın et al. 2005: 32). Then, "good punctuation is crucial for successful academic writing. Many students' essays use little punctuation beyond commas and full stops. But to be restricted to just two forms of punctuation mark, when writing your essay, is like building a house using only a hammer and a saw: you can do it; but not very well. By learning to use more, or all, of the available forms of punctuation you will be able to communicate and express your ideas, and arguments, more clearly (Collinson et al. 1998)."

On the other hand, an effective writing should present some important signals to the reader to help to grasp the exact meaning or idea of it. In this context, it is claimed that: "punctuation is in large part a system of conventions the function of which is to assist the written language in indicating those elements of speech which cannot be conveniently set down on paper: chiefly pause, pitch, and stress (Markwardt 1942 cited in Nunberg 1990:11) .

## Limitations

The mechanical errors but not other types of errors were examined and analysed in terms of interference.

## The Review of Literature

### Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH)

Contrastive language hypothesis declares that a learner's L1 interferes with his or her acquisition of a second language, and that it, for that reason, comprises the most important difficulty to master a new language. CA maintains that when the structures of L1 are different from those of L2, errors that reflect the structure of L1 are committed. So, these types of errors are assumed to be the effect of L1 habits on L2 production (Dulay et al. 1982:97).

Contrastive analysis also relies on structural linguistic. Davies underlines that "prior to the emergence of applied linguistics in the late fifties/early sixties, the combination of structural linguistics and behavioural psychology led to contrastive analysis approaches in language acquisition study and to behaviouristic methods of language teaching (repetition, habit formation, translation)." (Davies & Elder 2004:249)

To sum up, according to Gass and Selinker (2008: 96-97), the assumptions that the contrastive analysis based on are as followings:

1. Contrastive analysis is based on a theory of language that claims that language is habit and that language learning involves the establishment of a new set of habits.
2. The major source of error in the production and/or reception of a second language are the native language.
3. One can account for errors by considering differences between the L1 and the L2.
4. A corollary to item is that the greater the differences, the more errors will occur.
5. What one has to do in learning a second language is learn the differences. Similarities can be safely ignored as no new learning is involved. In other words, what is dissimilar between two languages is what must be learned.
6. Difficulty and ease in learning are determined respectively by differences and similarities between the two languages in contrast.

Also, CA puts forward the term interference which stems from unfamiliarity with the L2, that is to say, learner's not having mastered L2 structures (Dulay et al. 1982:99). Moreover, it must be born in mind that the terms '*interference*' and '*transfer*' are important in CA. The former one means that "...due to the unfamiliarity with the L2, that is, to the learner's not having learned target patterns..." ( Dulay et al. 1982:97) on the other hand, according to Lado (1957) the latter is about "...the grammatical structure of the native language tends to be transferred to the foreign language... we have here the major source of difficulty or ease in learning the foreign language .... Those structures that are different will be difficult." (Lado 1957:58-59 cited in Dulay et al. 1982: 99).

The term '*transfer*' was elaborated by behaviourist psychologist as *positive and negative transfer* referring to such a process in which the automatic, uncontrolled, and subconscious past learned behaviours are used to construct new responses. Needless to say, negative transfer refers to the errors stemming from old,

habitual behaviours that are different from new behaviours. On the other hand positive transfer is the correct performance of L2 learners the new behaviour is the same as old ones (Dulay et al. 1982:101).

## Error Analysis

Ellis (1986) criticizes contrastive analysis and thinks that CAH fall in short to predict all the errors that learners' commit. "First, there were the doubts concerning the ability of contrastive analysis to predict errors. These doubts arose when researchers began to examine language learners' language in depth. Second, there were a number of theoretical criticisms regarding the feasibility of comparing languages and the methodology of contrastive analysis. Third, there were reservations about whether contrastive analysis had anything relevant to offer to language teaching (p.27)."

## Methodology

### Subjects

32, intermediate level students, (12 males, 20 females), attending the classes regularly, and 29 upper-intermediate level students (8 males and 21 females) were the subjects of this study.

### Instruments

A total of 300 papers written by 32, intermediate level students, and 225 papers written by 29 upper-intermediate level students were examined in this study.

### Procedure

The composition papers were collected from January 5<sup>th</sup> 2009 to May 29<sup>th</sup>, 2009. The papers in question were from the compositions or paragraphs written at home as assignments and also written in class hours studies by the intermediate level prep class students. The collected paper was examined to signify only 'mechanical errors' and then the errors were counted and categorized. Finally, the results obtained by contrastive analysis were discussed in terms of interference.

### Research Questions

- Do L1 punctuation and capitalization interfere with L2 composition papers of Turkish EFL students?
- Does interference decrease as level of the students increase?

## Contrastive Usage of Some Punctuation Marks and Capitalisation

When compared English punctuation system to Turkish, there exists some critical and completely different usages; therefore, errors of interference are abundant in the written production of the novice EFL writers. The below tables present the completely different usage of some punctuation marks between English and Turkish are given and supported by examples.

Full Stop (.)	Example	English Usage	Turkish Usage
Common after abbreviations	Dr. Laura	√	√
Numbers	12.315	X	√
Decimals	5.5	√	X
To separate part of dates	29.05.2007	X	√
Between hours and minutes	11.30	X	√

**Table 1.** Uncommon usage of 'full stop' in both languages (English-Turkish)

(Note: This table has been adapted from Akalın et al.(2005), Swan (2005 and English Style Guide, University of Copenhagen, 2007, p.3, <http://ordbog.ku.dk/pdf/styleguide.pdf/>)

Comma	Example	English Usage	Turkish Usage
Co-ordinate Clause	Dr. Laura	√	X
Subordinate Clause	If you study hard, you will be successful.	√	X
Numbers	7,827	√	X
Decimals	3,5	X	√
Insert an additional comma before the final 'and' (or 'or') if needed for clarification (the Oxford comma):	<i>Sugar, beef and veal, and milk products</i>	√	X
<i>Linked sentences.</i> Use a comma to separate two sentences linked by a conjunction such as 'but', 'yet', 'while' or 'so' to form a single sentence:	<i>The committee dealing with the question of commas agreed on a final text, but the issue of semicolons was not considered.</i>	√	X

**Table 2.** Uncommon usage of 'comma' in both languages (English-Turkish)

(Note: This table has been adapted from Akalın, Ş. et al.(2005), Swan (2005 and English Style Guide, University of Copenhagen, 2007, p.3, <http://ordbog.ku.dk/pdf/styleguide.pdf/>)

Apostrophe	Example	English Usage	Turkish Usage
<i>Plurals of abbreviation</i> do not take an apostrophe	MEPs, UFOs	√	X
<i>Plurals of figures</i> do not take an apostrophe.	<i>Pilots of 747s undergo special training.</i>	X	√

**Table 3.** Apostrophe in English and Turkish

(Note: This table has been adapted from Akalın, Ş. et al.(2005), Swan (2005 and English Style Guide, University of Copenhagen, 2007, p.3, <http://ordbog.ku.dk/pdf/styleguide.pdf/>)

On the other hand, capitalisation is another challenging issue for the EFL students as Turkish has some different capitalization, particularly upper case of the letter 'i' can be traced on any written production easily which is the evidence of L1 interference.

Capitalization	Example	English Usage	Turkish Usage
Using lower case for job titles after name	Laura, professor	√	X
Using upper case of the letter 'i' as 'İ'	ACCIDENTS	X	√

**Table 4.** Capitalisation in English and Turkish

## Problems in Punctuation for Learners of English

Most of the language share some common usage of the punctuation and capitalization rules; however, there are also some uncommon rules that can be explained by the characteristics of the languages; especially, in Turkish, possessive markers with the pronouns carry different punctuation. Below the most probable mechanical errors of the EFL students' production in the compositions and exam papers are tried to be explained (English Style Guide, University of Copenhagen, 2007, p.13, <http://ordbog.ku.dk/pdf/styleguide.pdf/>)

1. *Its/It's*. Note that "its" is a possessive determiner (like mine, yours, his, hers, ours), whereas the -s in "it's" is an abbreviation for *is* (it is). Do not confuse with the use of possessive -s (genitive), which is usually separated by an apostrophe: Peter's thesis, the faculty's students.
2. *Seasons, etc.* No capitals for *spring, summer, autumn, winter*; capitals for weekdays, months and feast-days: *Tuesday, November, Christmas Day*.
3. *Numbers and fractions*. Numbers take hyphens when they are spelled out. Fractions take hyphens when used attributively, but not when used as nouns: *twenty-eight, two-thirds completed*." In English a hyphen is used to indicate fraction, however in Turkish derivational morphemes such as -lik, -lık, -luk, -lük are used.
4. Sometimes L2 learners overgeneralize contracted forms. For example;  
It had ≠ it'd  
It was ≠ It's
5. *Courtesy questions*. No question mark is needed after a request or instruction put as a question for courtesy: *Would you please sign and return the attached form?*
6. *Nouns ending in -s*, including proper names and abbreviations, form their singular possessive with -'s, just like nouns ending in other letters.  
*an actress's pay; Mr Jones's paper; Helios's future is uncertain; AWACS's success*

## Discussion and Conclusion

In this study we tried to seek answers to following research questions:

1. Do L1 punctuation and capitalization interfere with L2 composition papers of Turkish EFL students?
2. Does interference decrease as levels of the students increase?

Level	TPs	TEs	G Es	%	L1 IEs	%
Intermediate	300	221	176	79,7	45	20,3
Upper-intermediate	225	118	98	83	20	17

**Table 5.** Distribution of Error Types Depending on the Level of the Students

Note: TPs= total papers; TEs= total errors; G Es= general errors; L1 IEs= L1 interference errors.

The error types and levels of the students have been given in *Table 5*. According to the table, both intermediate and upper-intermediate students committed fewer interference errors (20,3 % and 17 %, respectively) than general errors. Another important result of the study is that as the level increases, the rate of the interference decreases (20,3 % for intermediate level students, whereas 17 % for upper-intermediate students).

As a result of the study it is clear that EFL students are prone to commit punctuation and capitalization errors which can be traced to the drawback of learners' L1. Even though the number of such errors isn't so high and such errors can diminish as the level increases, for the immediate purposes such as passing the written exams during the study period one has to be proficient enough in using punctuation marks as well as capitalisation. Interference errors or errors of other types can be ignored if the students are learning English for the purposes other than teaching in the future, but if they are expected to teach in the target domain, they have to learn and use them properly. It is recommended that in order to avoid L1 interference Turkish EFL students

should be taught punctuation marks and capitalisation comparatively and explicitly.

## References

- Akalın, Ş.H., Toparlı, R. Korkmaz, Z., Gözaydın, N. Zülfikar, H. and Yücel, B. (2005). *Yazım Klavuzu*. Ankara:Türk Dil Kurumu.
- Collinson I., Mort, P. & Downey, T.L. (1998), The Learning Centre, The University of New South Wales, <http://www.lc.unsw.edu.au/onlib/pdf/puct.pdf> Retrieved on 12<sup>th</sup> March, 2009.
- Davies, A., Elder C. (2004) *The Handbook of Applied Linguistics*. UK: Blackwell Publishing.
- Dulay, H., Burt, M.& Krashan, S.(1982). *Language Two*. NY: Oxford University Press.
- English Style Guide, University of Copenhagen, 2007, p.3, <http://ordbog.ku.dk/pdf/styleguide.pdf>.Retrieved On 23rd March 2009.
- Gass, Susan M.& Selinker, L. (2008). *Second Language Acquisition, An Introductory Course*. NY: Routledge.
- Marckwardt, A. H. (1942). *Introduction to the English Language*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Nunberg, G. (1990), *The Linguistics of Punctuation*, CSLI Lecture Notes Number 18, Stanford, California: CSLI Publications.
- Robert, L. (1957), *Linguistics Across Cultures*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Pres.
- Swan, M. (2005).Practical English Usage. Oxford: Oxford University Press.  
[http://www.languagechic.com/english\\_punctuation.html](http://www.languagechic.com/english_punctuation.html)